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SUBJECT: PROMINENT HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS FLEE ETHIOPIA

REF: A. ADDIS 1136  
[1](#)B. ADDIS 0031

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) The leaders of the two most prominent human rights organizations in Ethiopia have fled the country within weeks of each other due to fear of persecution. Chairman of the independent Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) and former Supreme Court Justice Abebe Worke and Director of Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association (EWLA) Mahdere Paulos left Ethiopia on approximately June 27 and June 13 respectively. EHRCO Chairman Abebe Worke fled the country while on bail after being arrested by government officials in early June. Officially, he was charged with trying to sell illegal radio broadcasting equipment that was imported without paying taxes, and faces imprisonment of up to 20 years. The equipment, property of Addis Broadcasting Company (ABC, of which Abebe is a shareholder), was obtained in 2002 through a grant from the Norwegian Government. It was intended to foster independent media, but ABC was unable to obtain a broadcasting license. While none of the equipment was actually sold, police arrested Abebe, Voice of America (VOA) journalist Meleskachew Ameha (shareholder), two prospective buyers, and the general manager of ABC for the intent to sell/buy the equipment. Abebe's lawyer said that the case has dubious legal grounds and is politically motivated in light of ABC's affiliation with shareholder and prominent opposition leader Berhanu Nega, who was recently charged in absentia for plotting to overthrow the government. The government has long been unhappy with EHRCO's activities in shedding prominent public light on human rights abuses throughout Ethiopia. Abebe, a green card holder, fled to the U.S., where his children reside.

[1](#)2. (C) EWLA Director Mahdere Paulos fled Ethiopia following rumored reports of her imminent arrest. Mahdere's close friend and EWLA colleague confided to her that prison officials were trying to implicate Mahdere in the Ginbot Seven group (Berhanu Nega's group) recently charged with planning to overthrow the government. Mahdere's friend's husband was charged in the Ginbot Seven group and is being held at Kaliti prison awaiting sentencing. After visiting her husband in prison, Mahdere's friend reported that her husband had been severely tortured and that during interrogation prison officials tried to force him to implicate Mahdere in the Ginbot Seven conspiracy. Mahdere was already concerned about government retaliation following the widely-publicized rebuttal to the U.S. Human Rights Report in May (Ref. A), in which the government accused EWLA on national television of "feeding the U.S. Embassy lies and tarnishing Ethiopia's reputation." Mahdere fled Ethiopia, leaving her two small children in the care of her husband. She told PolOff that she desperately did not want to leave

her homeland and family, but felt that if she stayed she would be arrested. She is currently in Virginia staying with her cousin and feels "helpless and bewildered" as she ponders what to do next.

Comment

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13. (C) The departures of Abebe and Mahdere, arguably the two most vocal human rights advocates in Ethiopia, is testimony to the perception of increasing government hostility towards certain civil society actors, notably those that are critical of the government. The passage of a law governing civil society organizations in January (Ref. B) has seriously jeopardized the survival of human rights advocacy organizations by limiting funding from foreign sources to less than 10 percent of the budget. Since EWLA currently receives 99 percent of its funding from foreign sources, it has less than one year to mobilize domestic donor support from a poor country with no culture of philanthropy. The departure of the leaders of these organizations further weakens them and could potentially lead to their collapse. Responding to intense international criticism over the civil society legislation, the government claimed that the intent of the law is to strengthen civil society and "create Ethiopian solutions for Ethiopian problems." Judging from the state of Ethiopia's two most prominent human rights organizations, it seems to be doing quite the opposite. End Comment.

YAMAMOTO